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ABSTRACT

A computer-assisted analysis was conducted of the capitalization skills taught in nine series of language arts textbooks. The results indicated that while textbook authors generally agreed on the inclusion of certain basic capitalization skills, significant differences existed with regard to introductory levels, grade-level sequencing, the amount of practice provided, and the number of specific skills taught. The fact that such widespread differences exist suggests that classroom teachers and language arts supervisors should examine their adopted texts carefully to determine the nature and extent of instruction that such texts provide, and the amount of supplemental instructional methods and materials in capitalization skills they need to develop. (RL)

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CAPITALIZATION INSTRUCTION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

Larry A. Gentry

ABSTRACT

An analysis of nine language arts series was undertaken to identify the scope and sequence of capitalization instruction in elementary schools. Similarities and differences among texts and implications for instruction are discussed.

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Larry A. Gentry

Although the proper use of capital letters is generally considered essential to effective writing, research on the teaching and learning of capitalization is virtually nonexistent. In a recent review of the literature pertaining to punctuation and capitalization, Cronnell (1980) asserts that "capitalization arouses almost no interest" among authorities in composition (p. 1). An examination of past issues of Education Index reveals that only one journal article on capitalization, a one-page description of an innovative teaching technique, was published during the 1970's. Two dissertation studies (Burrus, 1971; Brandt, 1974) gave some attention to capitalization as a part of their analyses of various approaches to teaching the "mechanics" of writing. Only one study, now 20 years old (Odom, 1960), treats capitalization instruction in a systematic and relatively thorough manner.

The paltry treatment accorded this basic skill by researchers is, if not justifiable, perhaps understandable. Unlike punctuation (see Gentry, 1980), with which it is often coupled under the general "mechanics" heading, faulty capitalization seldom interferes with the meaning of a sentence. As Hillerich (1976, p. 191) says, ". . . most uses of capital letters add little to clarity. [They are] arbitrary social conventions and must be learned as a matter of courtesy."

But are they learned? A number of recent studies on the writing abilities of students suggest that lack of knowledge about capitalization is a common source of error. In the most recent of these, 9,000 Canadian students, enrolled in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades provided writing samples for analysis. The examiners report that capitalization

errors were made by 62% of the fourth graders, 43% of the eighth graders, and 42% of the twelfth graders. Mistakes in capitalization were the most common type of mechanical error made by the fourth graders and the second most common type in higher grades (British Columbia Assessment, 1978).

Equally surprising results were obtained from a large-scale assessment of the writing skills of students in the United States (National Assessment, 1972). Of those students whose writing was deemed "average," 39% of the nine-year-olds, 48% of the thirteen-year-olds, and 31% of the seventeen-year-olds made capitalization errors. Although similar statistics are not available for a follow-up assessment that was conducted in 1974, a summary report issued by the investigators does not report any significant improvement (National Assessment, 1975).

Mazur (1976) examined the writings of 48 pupils, six at each grade level from the first through the eighth grades. He found that errors in capitalization were made by 50% or more of all pupils at each grade level beyond the first grade. The omission of a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence was the most common type of mechanical error found in this study; 31 of the students (65%) made this mistake. Mazur also reports that 42% of the test group used capitals incorrectly within a sentence and 25% ommitted needed capitals within a sentence.

The results of the Mazur study suggest that some capitalization skills are more difficult than others. Odom (1960, 1962) conducted an investigation that confirms this hypothesis. He administered a test of 37 different capitalization skills to 1818 students in grades four, five, and six, and found significant differences in proficiency across skills and across grade levels. The results of this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

AVERAGE GRADE-LEVEL SCORES
FOR CAPITALIZATION TEST ITEMS*

Capitalization Skill	4th	5th	6th
Greeting of a Letter	77.50	79.75	84.25
Cities	70.00	77.00	85.25
Countries	67.00	76.50	81.75
States	68.00	74.75	79.50
Pronoun I	71.25	75.25	78.50
Days of the Week	64.00	70.00	78.25
Months of the Year	61.00	65.75	73.00
Nationalities	56.25	65.75	73.00
Individuals	57.00	65.50	72.50
Monuments	44.75	62.75	72.50
Personal Titles	53.25	61.25	70.50
Abbreviations of Days and Months	55.25	63.00	69.00
Indian Tribes	41.00	57.50	68.00
Mountains, Rivers, Ships, and Flags	41.00	57.50	66.25
Businesses and Services	35.75	54.00	64.75
First Word in Line of Poetry	54.75	61.00	63.25
Streets	41.75	56.50	63.25
Specific Trains, Ships, and Planes		52.25	62.25
First and Important words in Titles	41.00	50.25	62.00
Organizations and Clubs	25.75	46.00	59.00
Proper Adjectives		50.50	58.00
Initials	38.50	45.50	56.75
Public Buildings	26.75	41.75	55.75
Newspapers			53.25
"Box" and "Rural Route" in Addresses			52.00
Closing of a Letter	35.00	39.75	50.75
Departments of Government		43.75	50.25
Geographical Places		43.50	50.25
Holidays and Special Days	28.00	41.00	50.25
First Word of a Sentence	39.50	46.25	49.50
Important Documents		37.00	48.25
Each Topic in an Outline	24.25	35.00	47.75
Planets			42.75
Historical Events		24.00	35.00
Sacred Writings and The Deity		25.00	31.50
"Mother" and "Father"	6.25	6.75	7.25
Personified Nouns			3.25

*Adapted from Odom (1962)

As an example of the relative difficulty of different skills, Odom points to the results obtained in testing the ability of students to capitalize the names of countries and their ability to capitalize Mother and Father when required by context. Grade-level scores for the Countries skill show significant improvement across grades, with sixth-graders scoring almost 82%. The Mother and Father skill, however, proved to be extremely difficult at every level, with sixth-graders scoring less than 8%, only slightly better than students in the lower grades. Odom confirmed the difficulty of this latter skill when he administered the same items to a group of upper-division college students and obtained an average score of only 20%.

Although Odom's initial study was limited to students in the upper elementary grades, the results of his investigation have implications for the sequencing of capitalization skills throughout the elementary school years. Greene and Petty (1971, p. 259) drew on the Odom study in devising the following list of suggested skills for each grade level:

Grade 1:
a. The first word in a sentence.
b. The child's first and last names.
c. The name of the teacher, school, town, street.
d. The word I.

Grade 2:
a. Items listed for grade one.
b. The date
c. First and important words of titles of books.
d. Proper names used in children's writings.
e. Titles of compositions.
f. Names of titles: Mr., Mrs., Miss.

Grade 3:
a. Items listed for grades one and two.
b. Proper names: month, day, common holidays.
c. First word in a line of verse.
d. First and important words in titles of books, stories, poems.
e. First word of salutation of informal note, as "Dear."
f. First word of closing of informal note, as "Yours" or "Your friend."

Grade 4:
a. All that is listed for preceding grades.
b. Names of cities and states in general.
c. Names of organizations to which children belong, as Cub Scouts, Grade Four, etc.
d. "Mother," "Father," when used in place of the name.
e. Local geographical names.

Grade 5:
a. All that is listed for previous grades.
b. Names of streets.
c. Names of all places and persons, countries, oceans, etc.
d. Capitalization used in outlining.
e. Titles when used with names, such as President Lincoln.
f. Commercial trade names.

Grade 6:
a. All that is listed for preceding grades.
b. Names of the Deity and the Bible.
c. First word of a quoted sentence.
d. Proper adjectives, showing race, nationality, etc.
e. Abbreviations of proper nouns and titles.

Greene and Petty emphasize that listings such as this "are merely guides for the introduction of drill upon the items" (p. 259) and that instruction in the various skills should be provided as the need arises. Although they contend that language textbooks usually do not provide adequate drill or practice for establishing good capitalizaiton skills, the authors concede that the textbook is likely to determine what will be taught.

> For the typical teacher, overloaded with many other subjects, the textbook provides an organized and cataloged source of information on the curriculum considered suitable for instruction in the particular grade. . . . Unless he [sic] has been fortunate enough to have had considerable training in methods of teaching elementary school language arts, the classroom teacher is compelled to depend almost entirely on the textbook for suggestions about teaching specific types of lessons (pp. 540-541).

If, as Greene and Petty suggest, much of what students learn is directly related to the contents of language arts textbooks, then it is important to know precisely what those contents are. A thorough examination of capitalization instruction in textbooks should answer such questions as: Are capitalization skills given adequate treatment in textbooks? Are these skills sequenced in order of difficulty? Does the amount of instruction and the sequence of skills differ among series?

In order to answer these and other questions, researchers at SWRL conducted a computer-assisted analysis of the skills taught in nine series of language arts textbooks (see Appendix A). Using a matrix of skills designed by Humes (1978), the investigators subjected each text to a detailed, page-by-page analysis of instructional content. Each exercise was coded according to content category (e.g., capitalizing titles, proper adjectives, etc.) These data were then processed by computer, resulting in a content-specific analysis of instruction at each grade level.

The results of the study indicate that while textbook authors generally agree on the inclusion of certain basic capitalization skills, significant differences exist with regard to introductory levels, grade-level sequencing, the amount of practice provided, and the number of specific skills taught.

All series, for example, provide instruction in five essential capitalization skills: (1) first word in a sentence, (2) names of individuals, (3) days of the week, (4) months of the year, and (5) personal titles. Eight of the nine series also teach the following skills: (1) pronoun I, (2) the greeting and/or closing of a letter, (3) holidays and special days, and (4) titles of bookes, stories, etc. (see Appendix B).

Although textbook authors generally agree that such basic capitalization skills should be taught, there is considerable disagreement regarding the proper grade level for introduction of a specific skill or group of skills. One series, for example, does not teach any capitalization in the first grade and introduces only four such skills in the second grade. Another introduces ten skills in the first grade. The skill labeled Personal Titles provides an extreme example of this lack of unanimity; two series include it in first grade instruction, four teach it in the second grade, three others teach it in the third grade, and another delays instruction until the sixth grade. Similarly, such simple skills as capitalizing the names of streets, pets, and months of the year range from first to fou th grades in level of introduction.

A few capitalization skills are recognized as so basic to written discourse that they generally precede instruction in less common skills. Capitalizing the names of individuals and capitalizing the first word in a sentence are both introduced in the first grade by seven series and capitalizing the days of the week and the pronoun I are taught in six first grade texts. Conversely, four skills never appear earlier than the third grade: (1) geographical places (e.g., Asia, Pacific Ocean), (2) nationalities, (3) quotations and/or dialogue, and (4) the rule for capitalizing Mother and Father. Most series introduce virtually all of their capitalization skills before the fifth grade. Only three of the series provide new instruction in the fifth or sixth grades.

If any one factor can be said to characterize the primary difference between the nine series, it is the overall emphasis (or lack thereof) accorded capitalization skills in general. As Appendix C clearly

reveals, tremendous differences exist with regard to the number of capitalization exercises included in texts at various grade levels. This is most readily apparent in the extreme differences that characterize Series F and G. While Series G provides a substantial number of exercises at every grade level and a total of 534, Series F teaches capitalization at only four grade levels and provides only 35 exercises. Substantial differences also exist among textbooks at all grade levels. The greatest range of relative emphasis is found in third grade texts; two series have only three capitalization exercises at this level, while two other texts each provide well over one hundred such items.

It is evident from this study that there is little agreement among textbook authors as to instruction in capitalization skills. While all language arts series include some instruction in the very basic and most essential skills, such matters as introductory levels and amount of practice are characterized by a wide variety of strategies. The fact that such widespread differences exist suggests that classroom teachers and language arts supervisors should examine their adopted texts carefully to determine the nature and extent of instruction that such texts provide. Where the textbooks are found to be inappropriate for teaching district objectives and/or those skills that students need for effective writing, teachers must provide supplemental instruction through other methods and materials.

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APPENDIX A

Language Arts Series Analyzed

Anderson, F. B., Armington, D. E., Dennis, J. M., & Dusel, W. New directions in English. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Botel, M., & Dawkins, J. Communicating. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973.

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Hand, J. S., Harsh W., New, J. W., & Shane, H. G. Experiences in language. River Forest, IL: Laidlaw, 1975.

Martin, J., & Olson, D. C. Patterns of language. New York: American Book Company, 1977.

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Thoburn, Tina, Cox, A., McLeod, A., Schlatterbeck, R., Terry, A., & Thoburn, Terry. Macmillan English: Series E. New York: Macmillan, 1979.

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY LEVELS OF
CAPITALIZATION SKILLS

	SERIES AND GRADE LEVEL								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Abbreviations	4	2	2		2		3	3	
Addresses	3		2		3			3	3
Cities	3	2		2	2	4	2		2
Days of week	2	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	1
Geographical places	4	4	4		4	4	3		3
Holidays, special days	2	2	3		3	4	2	2	2
Individuals	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	1	1
Initials		1		3	3		2		3
Letter parts	3	3	3	3	1		2	1	1
Months of year	2	2	3	2	1	4	2	1	2
"Mother" & "Father"		3	4		4		4		
Nationalities		3	6		4	4	4		
Personal titles	3	2	6	2	2	1	2	1	3
Pets	2	1	2		1	4			1
Poetry (first word)	5	2		3	2	1	2	1	
Pronoun I	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	
Quotations, dialogue	4	3	4		4		3	3	5
Sentence (first word)	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
States	3	2		2	2		2		
Streets	2	2		2	2	4	2	1	
Titles of books, etc.	2	2	4	3	2	4	2	1	

APPENDIX C

NUMBER OF CAPITALIZATION EXERCISES
BY SERIES AND GRADE LEVEL

	SERIES								
Grade	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1st	6	22		1	13	5	23	9	16
2nd	6	32	6	18	84	16	57	27	28
3rd	18	16	37	31	130	3	176	3	82
4th	14	59	5	40	101	11	111	40	32
5th	19	69	11	25	75		116	19	53
6th	19	37		56	27		51	17	33
TOTAL	82	235	59	171	430	35	534	115	244